Statement of Chairman Tom Davis
Government Reform Committee Hearing
"Overexposed: The Threats to Privacy and Security on File Sharing Networks"
May 15, 2003

Good morning, a quorum being present, the Committee on Government Reform

will come to order. We are here today to continue our examination into peer-to-peer file-

sharing programs. This is the Committee's second hearing on this topic. At our first

hearing held in March, we examined the growing problem of the availability of

pornography, including child pornography, on these networks. The Committee found

that pornography is, in fact, being traded on peer-to-peer networks, and children are at

great risk of inadvertent exposure to pornography while using these programs.

File-sharing programs are Internet applications that allow users to download and

directly share electronic files from other users on the same network. Users of these

programs can share files that contain documents as well as music or videos. These

programs are surging in popularity.

Kazaa, the most popular file-sharing program, has been downloaded almost 225

million times, making it the most popular software downloaded on the Internet.

File sharing technology can be beneficial. However, as we learned from our first

hearing on this topic, use of this technology also presents certain risks. Today, the

Committee will examine the risks to personal privacy and computer security posed by the

use of peer-to-peer file-sharing programs.

Specifically, we will look at three issues: first, the reason why highly personal

information is available over these networks; second, the potential effects of software

known as "spyware" or "adware" that is being bundled or included with file sharing

programs; and third, the growing risk of downloading computer viruses from files shared on these programs.

The Committee will release a staff report today that highlights these issues. Through a simple search on one file-sharing program, Committee staff easily obtained tax returns, medical records, attorney-client communications, resumes, and personal correspondence.

Users of these programs may accidentally share this information because of incorrect program configuration. They also could be intentionally sharing these files because increased file sharing earns the user higher priority status on popular downloads.

Either way, users of these programs need to be aware that sharing personal information can open the door to identity theft, consumer fraud, or other unwanted uses of their personal data. Parents, businesses, and government agencies also need to be aware of these risks if their home or office computers contain file-sharing programs.

Another concern raised by the use of peer-to-peer file-sharing is the bundling of these programs with software known as "spyware" and "adware." These programs monitor Internet usage primarily for marketing purposes, without the users knowledge. They also give rise to pop-up advertisements and spam e-mail.

Finally, computer viruses can easily spread through file sharing programs, since files are shared anonymously. In fact, just this week, a new computer virus called "Fizzer" spread rapidly across the Internet, infecting computers worldwide through emails and the file sharing program Kazaa.

We have assembled an excellent panel of witness who will discuss these important issues. I would like to thank each of our witnesses for appearing today.

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